

BEER FRAME

THE JOURNAL OF INCONSPICUOUS CONSUMPTION

No. 7

\$2⁵⁰



PC OR NOT PC?

THAT IS THE QUESTION

I've never been religious,



but it was hard not to sense the presence of a higher power this past October when I found myself approaching the foul line with bowling ball in hand at Holler House, a splendid Milwaukee tavern whose basement is home to America's oldest pair of officially sanctioned lanes, dating back to 1908. Now *that*, friends, is a pilgrimage.

In other words, divine forces are where we find them, a philosophy that would certainly be seconded by the 39 Heaven's Gate cultists if they were still around to be consulted on the matter.

Most attempts to explain the group's mass suicide have been unenlightened at best, but to the more perceptive eye, the group's motivation is as obvious as a 7-10 split or a malfunctioning pinspotter: After all, what is the Hale-Bopp comet if not a cosmic bowling ball hurtling squarely toward our solar system's 1-3 pocket? Rumors that many of the cultists had included copies of *Beer Frame* among their neatly stacked belongings could not be confirmed, but the group's apparent desire to ride in the wake of our era's ultimate strike ball can only be applauded.

Or maybe they were just depressed to death — literally — over bowling's disappearance from the cold-weather airwaves. Thanks to years of so-so ratings and abysmal demographics, fabled ABC announcers Chris Schenkel and Bo Burton were nowhere to be heard this past fall and winter, when the Pro Bowlers Association's weekly tournament finals were relegated to ESPN. It wasn't until March that the sport of sports returned to its customary Saturday-afternoon slot on ABC, by which time Burton's patented "You're right, Chris" soundbite (delivered so robotically over the years that he was thought to have joined a cult himself) had grown rusty from disuse.

Happily, there are no such problems here at *Beer Frame* HQ, where the demographics are universal and inconspicuous consumption continues its broad appeal among all audience sectors. Recent months have seen the publication of the long-awaited *Beer Frame* anthology, entitled *Inconspicuous Consumption: An Obsessive Look at the Stuff We Take for Granted* (see p. 50), and have also found this reporter making some unlikely appearances on the late-night TV talk show circuit. Meanwhile, Inconspicuous Records is poised for its debut (see p. 51), and the movie contract is supposedly in the mail. All of which may not give you religion, but should make some sort of believer out of you all the same.

— PAUL LUKAS, MAY 1997

PRODUCTS

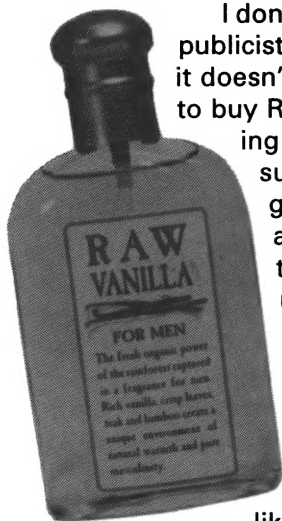
New York City's bleak supermarket scene got a boost last fall when two Price Costco outlets opened. Impressive testaments to consumerism, granted, but I was astounded to find that they failed the most basic supermarket test: *plenty of Oreos but no Hydrox*. Next!

Raw Vanilla for Men Cologne, 3.3-ounce bottle (Coty Inc.)

July seems like an odd time to launch a new cologne — everyone knows the real fragrance of summer is perspiration, and no commercial scent can compete with *that* when the you're stuck on a crowded subway platform on a hot day. But the folks at Coty Inc. are apparently untroubled by such concerns, because July of 1996 was when they chose to bestow their new Raw Vanilla for Men cologne upon a sweltering world.

Be sure to take note of that product name — it's not just "Vanilla," it's "*Raw* Vanilla." Not tamed vanilla, not domesticated vanilla, not neutered vanilla — none of that wimpy stuff for the rugged Raw Vanilla man. No, this is the real deal, the rough-hewn essence of that most macho of fragrances — the kind of scent that tells the world just what sort of man you are.

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I don't wear cologne myself, so I called Raw Vanilla's publicist, Alison Brod, to learn more. As she explained, it doesn't really matter whether the average guy wants to buy Raw Vanilla, because the product is actually being marketed to women. Coty has had tremendous success with two vanilla-based women's fragrances — Vanilla Fields and Vanilla Musk — and the firm's market research shows that two-thirds of the women who purchase those products are ready to buy Raw Vanilla for the men in their lives.

So if men aren't expected to buy Raw Vanilla, what sort of man is expected to wear it? According to the press release, it's "for the man who is confident, masculine, and unafraid to wear a unique scent," which sounds like a polite way of saying, "It's for the guy who's willing to make a fool of himself." Or, as an uncomfortable-sounding Brod put it when I asked her what type of man is sufficiently manly to wear Raw Vanilla, "I don't know. I don't really have a description of that man, exactly."

Of course, vanilla isn't the sole component of the Raw Vanilla olfactory experience — it's just the primary element, or "top note," as they say in the biz. There's a whole rain forest of other scents in there, including fern, Brazilian mint, South American spruce, bergamot, juniper berry, giant water lily, geranium, clary sage, dewy orchid, teak, sandalwood, tonka bean, bamboo, wild palm, and the obligatory musk.

And what is the odoriferous result of this concoction? Personally, I think it smells like Windex, but that's what I always think about cologne. When I asked Brod what she thought of Raw Vanilla, she stammered, "I like it — it's kind of fresh, yet a little bit interesting." This didn't sound like such a ringing endorsement, so I took an unscientific poll of my associates (some male, some female) and got a wide range of feedback on the product:

"Smells like that crap they put on your hair at the barber shop."

"Smells better than aftershave."

"Not entirely unpleasant, but it does have a very cologne-y underbelly."

"Halfway between CK1 and those Black Muslim oils."

"Cheap but pleasant."

"Smells like those Handi-Wipes they give you on airplanes."

"No self-respecting man would wear this."

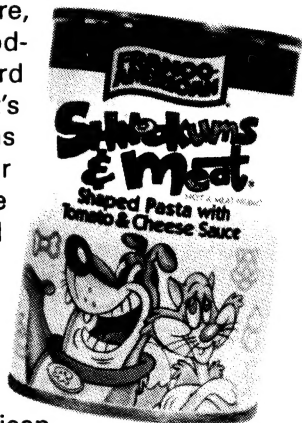
"Very subtle and very feminine."

These last two comments are rather telling — nobody found Raw Vanilla particularly evocative of the Y chromosome. The most masculine thing about the stuff, in fact, is its very attractive bottle, which is shaped like a hip flask. All of which suggests a great alternate use for this product: Remove the cap and pump spray, dump out the cologne, run the bottle through the dishwasher a few times to get rid of the scent, and then fill it with hootch for when you need a quick nip. Hell, if you're drinking the good stuff, you'll even smell better in the bargain. (Coty Inc, 237 Park Ave., NYC 10017)

Franco-American Shnookums & Meat Shaped Pasta with Tomato & Cheese Sauce (Campbell Soup Company)

There are plenty of weird products out there, but there are also lots of perfectly normal products that are saddled with inexplicably weird names — names that make so little sense, it's hard to fathom what the manufacturer was thinking. I would certainly have enjoyed, for example, being a fly on the wall during the product-development meetings that resulted in Shnookums & Meat meatless pasta.

In case you've never heard of Shnookums (a cat) or Meat (a dog), they're a pair of animated cartoon characters. I'd never heard of them myself until my pen-pal Amanda recently sent me two cans of Franco-American pasta named after them and bearing their licensed likenesses. One of the cans included meatballs but the other was just pasta and sauce, presenting an interesting conflict between the latter variety's name and its contents — it's called "Shnookums & Meat," but there's no meat in the product. Brilliant, right?



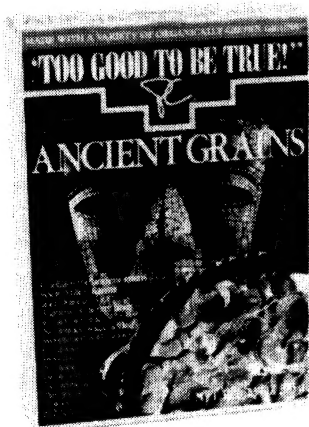
Franco-American chose to resolve the problem with a pair of fine-print disclaimers on the package label, the more amusing of which reads, "Meat is a character developed by Buena Vista Television. THERE IS NO MEAT IN THIS PRODUCT." It's not clear whether this is meant to mollify vegetarians or serve as full disclosure to carnivores, but either way the real question is why such an incongruously named grocery item exists in the first place. Why not just market the meatball-inclusive variety and leave it at that?

"We invented the canned children's pasta category," explained Franco-American spokesman Kevin Lowery when I put the question to him. "The top-selling product in that category is Spaghetti-Os, and the top-selling variety of that product is the plain, meatless variety." So when the Shnookums & Meat line was launched in 1995, it

was pretty much a foregone conclusion that there would be a meatless version, despite the potential confusion involving the name.

Shnookums and Meat's TV show was recently cancelled, and I don't think the little pasta shapes look much like the cartoon characters, but Lowery maintained that the product has performed well and that there has been no significant negative consumer feedback about the name. Indeed, when I raised the name issue with a phone rep on the company's toll-free customer-service hotline, she said she was unaware of any similar complaints (or of the product itself, for that matter) and implied that I was making a bit of a fuss about nothing. Okay, so maybe I'm being picky. Next time I call, however, perhaps I'll also mention that it seems a bit odd to market a children's product whose name conveniently abbreviates to "S&M." (Campbell Soup Company, Campbell's Place, Camden, NJ 08103)

President's Choice Ancient Grains Cereal, 13-ounce box (Loblaw Brands, Ltd.)



In the cereal biz, marketing pitches rarely deviate from some combination of health appeal (All-Bran, Total, Special K), youth appeal (Honey Comb, Count Chocula, the admirably timeless Kaboom), or comfort appeal (corn flakes, raisin bran). So I was surprised when my friend Heather gave me a box of President's Choice Ancient Grains, a reasonably tasty cereal whose cleverly subdued marketing premise makes a sneaky appeal to consumer guilt.

The pitch begins by establishing the cereal's historical pedigree. According to the box, the "ancient grains" referred to in the product name are spelt, millet, kamut, and quinoa. A note on the side panel then explains, "By supporting the use of these rare and ancient varieties of grains, you're encouraging the continued cultivation of these treasures from the past, which might otherwise be lost forever." This statement, despite its soothingly worded feel-good platitudes, is really a big finger designed to push the consumer's guilt button — just as *National Lampoon* once threatened, "Buy this magazine or we'll shoot this dog," the President's Choice folks are essentially saying, "Buy this cereal or you'll have a slew of grain extinctions on your hands.

But are ancient grains really rare and endangered grains? In an effort to find out, I spoke with Larry Griffin, Vice President for Quality Assurance at Loblaw Brands, the Canadian company that markets

the President's Choice line. He acknowledged that millet is widely used outside of North America and "certainly is not on the endangered list." The information he faxed me about quinoa and kamut was interesting but did little to indicate whether either grain was on the verge of vanishing from terra firma. Nonetheless, he maintained his company's party line: "If we can perhaps create a larger marketplace for something that might otherwise be in trouble, we're happy to do so. If there aren't places for these grains to go, you and I both know what happens — people stop growing them."

Well, maybe. But according to Charles Murphy, National Program Leader for Grain Crops at the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Agricultural Research Service, it isn't quite that simple. "The claim that eating this box of cereal is going to keep these grains from being lost to the world is a fellacious approach," he said. "I don't know of anything that would indicate that. There isn't anywhere near the quantity of, say, spelt grown for cereal as there is wheat or corn or whatever, but that doesn't mean it's endangered."

More to the point, as Murphy pointed out, President's Choice and their grain suppliers are hardly acting out of altruism. "Obviously, someone is growing these things commercially," he explained. "Whoever they are, they're not in the business of preserving seeds or species diversity — they're looking to make a profit growing a crop."

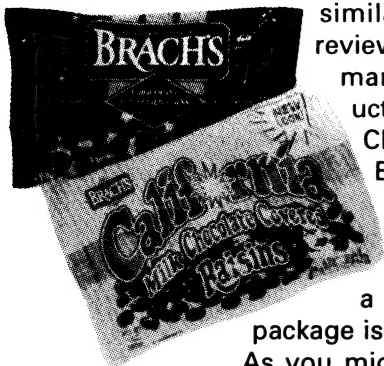
All of which is fine by me — it's just business, after all — but I wish they weren't so damn sanctimonious about it. Turns out that the big "PC" on the Ancient Grains box doesn't stand for "President's Choice" — it's for "politically correct." (Loblaws Brands, Ltd., 22 St. Clair Ave. East, Toronto, Ontario, M4T 2S8)

Brach's California Milk Chocolate Covered Raisins, 14-ounce bag (E. J. Brach Corporation)

We all know packaging is at least as important as the actual product in today's consumer marketplace. I learned that lesson anew when I recently strolled down the candy aisle of a North Carolina supermarket and found myself staring at two products sitting side-by-side on the shelf: Brach's Chocolate Covered Raisins and, in a much flashier package, Brach's California Milk Chocolate Covered Raisins.

I was struck by the similarity of these two product names both appearing under the Brach's umbrella, so I took a closer look. They appeared to be identical, right down to the bar-code number — the only differences between them were the slight variation in the product names and the very distinct package designs, the snazzier of which was adorned with a burst that read, "New Look!"

It's nothing new for a product to be revamped, of course [for a

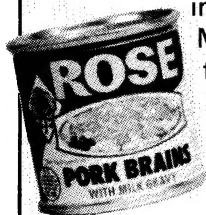


similar example, see the Alpo Cat Food review in *BF#2*], but I was intrigued by Brach's marketing strategy. Most bursts are product-oriented, with messages like, "More Cleaning Power!" or "Improved Taste!" But Brach's had neither improved their chocolate-covered raisins nor claimed to have done so — they were simply drawing attention to their "new look." It was a surprisingly frank admission that the package is more important than the product.

As you might imagine, Brach's Marketing Director Andy Jacobs didn't quite see it that way, although he confirmed that packaging is particularly crucial in the candy biz. "Confections is one of the highest impulse-purchase categories in the grocery store," he explained to me. "Packaging that's bright, vibrant, and exciting will help draw the consumer in."

Well, duh. But what does it mean when a company markets its wrapper more actively than the product inside, as Brach's is doing here? Jacobs, sensing where I was going with this, pointed out that even the best package can't sell lousy merchandise (the right thing to tell a reporter, although I suspect he believes otherwise) and ex-

News, Updates, Etc.: Last issue's call for additional brands of



canned pork brains resulted in several *Beer Frame* readers sending in cans of the same brand: Rose Pork Brains with Milk Gravy (Foell Packing Co.). This redundancy is a tad discouraging, but the Rose package design, which features an amazing illustration of the now-familiar brains 'n' eggs serving suggestion, is sufficiently engaging to buoy my mood. The chunky-looking brain sections are rendered in excruciating-

ly close detail, with lots of those squiggly little folds and creases that signify so unmistakably as gray matter. As Alleen Barber put it in the cover letter accompanying the can of Rose brains she sent in, "I was shocked to see that the artist's rendition...is so, well, *brain-like*." Well put. Big thanks to all who contributed. (Foell Packing Co., 3417 West 47th St., Chicago, IL 60632)

Recent visits to Snyder's Tavern, the upstate New York drinking establishment where this reporter first encountered Blind Robins Smoked Ocean Herring [see *Beer Frame #3*], have found the toothsome snack alarmingly absent from the bar's inventory. Turns out that the item has been discontinued from production, and we're all poorer for the loss. Accordingly, *Beer Frame* encour-

plained that the key to the raisins' makeover is not the package but the candy's name change, which soft-peddles "Brach's" and plays up the new "California Raisins" designation.

"People don't go to the store to buy Brach's," said Jacobs, "just like they don't go there to buy, say, General Mills — they're going to buy Cheerios, they're going to buy Snickers. So we've de-emphasized 'Brach's' and are now developing brands, like 'California Raisins.' " He said the packaging alteration, part of a Brach's-wide design overhaul that began in early 1995, is intended to highlight the product's new identity. "I can try to teach the consumer my brand name through these package bursts, by saying I have a 'new look,' " said Jacobs. It's sort of like changing your kid's name from Elmer to Mike so that everyone will take him more seriously, and then buying him some new clothes just to make sure.

Jacobs said Brach's overall sales are up 42 percent since the new brand-name program was launched, although the firm still trails Hershey's, M&M/Mars, and Nestlé in the candy sweepstakes. As for the raisins, Jacobs said consumers preferred the Brach's product by 2-1 over Nestlé's more popular Raisinettes in a 1995 blind taste test. Of course, the key word there is *blind* — if Jacobs could just have a sightless market, his "new look" would be unnecessary, not to mention irrelevant. (E. J. Brach Corp., 401 N. Cicero, Chicago, IL 60644)

ges all readers to fly their flags at half-mast and to send letters of protest to the manufacturer, not necessarily in that order. (Bar Food Products, 1052 W. Fulton, Chicago, IL 60607)

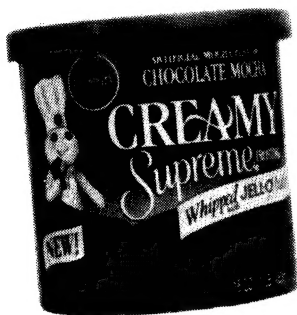
In happier news, Adam Yee of Sydney, Australia, reports that his country's postal service has issued a stamp honoring the mighty sport of bowling. This move, which closely follows the release of a similar stamp here in the U.S. [see *Beer Frame* #6], is a welcome indication that bowling, having already conquered America, is now taking its rightful place among the world's foremost cultural institutions. Now if we could just get the Israelis and Palestinians to collaborate on a joint-venture bowling stamp, Middle East peace would surely follow in short order.



Finally, several readers have written to tell of being engaged in a sexual liason and finding a *Beer Frame* temporary tattoo (see p. 51) emblazoned on a strategic part of their partner's anatomy. The results of such encounters have been positive, to say the least — in the words of one longtime reader, the sight of a *BF* tat on his beloved's inner thigh was so arousing "that it led to a different sort of consumption." To which I can only add, *bon appetit*.

Pillsbury Chocolate Mocha Creamy Supreme Frosting (The Pillsbury Company); Starbucks Ice Cream (Starbucks Ice Cream Partnership); Frappuccino Coffee Drinks (North American Coffee Partnership)

Let's get right to the point: I don't drink coffee. Never learned to like the taste, despite endless repeated attempts. I enjoy other things about coffee, mind you, including the smell of coffee, coffee ice cream, coffee milkshakes, and coffee shops. I even like making coffee when houseguests stop by for a visit. In other words, I like everything about coffee except coffee.



Of course, that's tantamount to heresy in our java-driven world. Tell someone you don't eat meat and you've got political correctness on your side. Tell someone you don't drink alcohol and you'll get credit for willpower and maturity (plus you'll make lots of pals among drinkers looking for a designated driver). But tell someone you don't drink coffee — well, trust me, you might as well be saying you have a three-fingered hand growing out of your back. You'll also be excluded from all

those coffee-centric rituals that look like so much fun: adding just the right amount of milk, casually saying, "Let's get together for coffee," the guilty pleasure of that third cup of the morning, commiserating with friends about caffeine headaches, and so on.

Fortunately, coffee culture and I finally appear to be moving toward an accommodation of sorts, thanks to the growing market presence of mocha products. Granted, coffee mixed with chocolate isn't quite the same as coffee all by itself, but it's a start, and it happens to be one of my favorite flavor combinations. For years, however, the mocha market was spotty at best, dominated by those dainty little faux-imported specialty coffees with names like "Suisse Mocha" and "Cafe Chocolatte." But I didn't want to feel cultured and sophisticated; I wanted to feel like a regular joe-consuming Joe, just like everyone else. Where was the mainstream mocha?

The first breakthrough occurred last summer, in the baking-goods aisle of an Iowa supermarket. For several years I'd been fruitlessly scanning the shelves in search of a ready-made mocha frosting, silently cursing the marketplace's failure to provide such an obvious product. And then, suddenly, I saw it: Pillsbury Chocolate Mocha Creamy Supreme Frosting. Okay, so it's artificially flavored and there's no actual coffee in it, but I was still one proud consumer when I handed it to the cashier — there I was, buying a silly coffee-related product like any normal person. And since I don't actually

have any cakes to frost, my mocha frosting can sit eternally in a cupboard, granting me a modicum of coffee credibility should anyone go snooping through my kitchen.

Things got even better a month or so later, when Starbucks Ice Cream appeared at my supermarket. I pounced on the Mocha Swirl flavor and figured this was the big time — I was partaking not just of coffee culture, but *Starbucks culture*. Of course, Starbucks is rather loathsome as cultural phenomena go, but I couldn't concern myself with that, especially not when I learned there was a mocha variety of Frappuccino Coffee Drinks, a Starbucks-branded line of bottled milkshake-ish beverages that were being test-marketed out west when I first heard about them (I believe they've since gone national). The Starbucks logo on these products is extremely annoying, but they taste great anyway — a combination that amounts to a bona-fide coffee-associated guilty pleasure. You see? In my own little way, I've finally become one of you. (The Pillsbury Company, 2866 Pillsbury Center, Minneapolis, MN 55402; Starbucks Ice Cream Partnership, 5929 College Ave., Oakland, CA 94618; North American Coffee Partnership, 1 Pepsi Way, Somers, NY 10589)



"Today, we're not only overwhelmed by European products from Nutella to Range Rovers—we're actually being colonized on a cultural level. How else to explain the sudden spectacular popularity of absurdly un-American products like 'hand-crafted' beer and boutique bread? Since when are Budweiser and Wonder Bread not good enough for Americans?"

Eurotrashed, 22 October 1996



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Cherry Smash

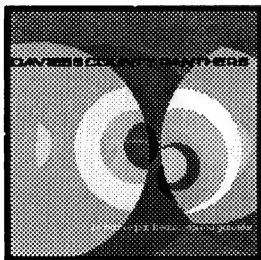


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Kylmänen Reindeer Pâté, 210-gram can (Kylmänen Oy)

Christmas may be a time for coming together and embracing our common bonds, but it can also highlight how different we are from one another. An interesting example of this came my way recently when *Flutter!* editrix Jaina Davis gave me a can of Finnish reindeer pâté. Here in America, of course, reindeer are so closely associated with Santa that eating one of them is out of the question. Why, we'd sooner chow down on Fido or Mittens than take a fork and knife to Donner or Blitzen, right?

"That's definitely a big problem," acknowledged Gordon Poest, corresponding secretary of the Michigan-based Reindeer Owners and Breeders Association. "If you're selling reindeer meat, do you call it venison or do you just go ahead and call it reindeer?" At the moment this question appears to be moot, because my local butcher shop said they couldn't procure any reindeer meat anyway.

No such problem exists in Finland, or anyplace else in northern Scandinavia, where reindeer are indigenous and plentiful, Santa Claus is unheard of, and the local Sami people have been eating reindeer meat, drinking reindeer milk, and making reindeer hides into leather for centuries. As Poest explained, "You buy reindeer meat there like you buy beef here. It's a staple of their agricultural industry."

Re-Calibration '97--

swearing at motorists - The Fear of Low-Flying Clouds 12"

Ron House - New Wave as The Next Guy cd (soon)

Gem/Jenny Mae 7" (soon)

Bevis Frond 7"

Gerbils 7"

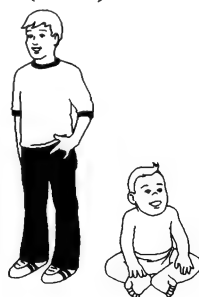
swearing at motorists 7"

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Back in the States, the reindeer biz is still a fledgling field. Poest said his organization's 200 members owned just a few thousand of the animals, most of which are rented out for Christmas exhibits or cultural-education projects. As for the meat, Poest (who owns eight reindeer himself and said he was "eating some right now" when I called) was enthusiastic: "It tastes more like beef than like venison. It's very tender — nice, lean meat." No wonder Rudolph was so eager for that safe, steady gig on Santa's sleigh team. (No address listed for Kylväminen Oy; Reindeer Owners and Breeders Association, Inc., 3626 80th Ave., Zeeland, MI 49464)

Update: I'd barely finished writing the preceding review when, in a rather remarkable coincidence, reader W. Graham Hueber sent me two more cans of the Finnish product. Hueber procured the pâté during a visit to Finland, where he says "they serve reindeer meat everywhere, and it is quite tasty — a very dark meat, but not at all tough, and very flavorful but not gamey."

Hueber's assessment of the pâté was less enthusiastic: "It's nearly all liver and not much else in the way of flavor except tin. I suspect that the nearest thing to reindeer meat in that can is the illustration of the animal shown on the label." In fact, this turns out to be fairly accurate — a closer reading of the ingredients listing, which I'd somehow neglected to inspect earlier, reveals that the first ingredient is actually *pork*, with reindeer meat running second and pork liver third. While this discovery did lead to some interesting mental images of Babe and Wilbur pulling Santa's sleigh, it did little to entice me to spread any reindeer pate on a Ritz, if you know what I mean. My cats, characteristically, had no such reservations.

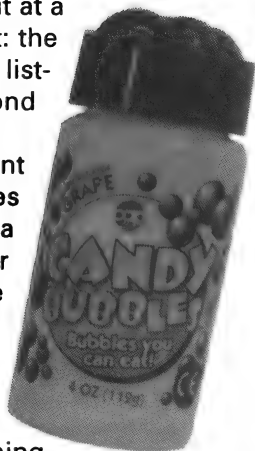
Candies: assorted products and manufacturers

Children have notoriously short attention spans, so confections manufacturers are constantly developing new packaging gimmicks, new promotional approaches, and new products — if a candy lasts as much as a year before the kids get bored with it and move on to the next fad, that's considered a success. Here are some recent entries that will be trying to survive for at least that long:

Cap Grape-Flavored Candy Bubbles, 4-ounce bottle: Genius — edible bubbles with a candy flavor. The package warns against drinking the liquid bubble concentrate, so you have to blow the bubbles (or have someone else blow them) and then catch them in your

mouth, a feat that's particularly amusing if you try it at a bar after a few drinks. Best inconspicuous element: the nutritional info, where the standard serving size is listed as "350 bubbles." (Cap Toys, Inc., 26201 Richmond Rd., Bedford Heights, OH 44146)

M&M's Minis, 1.24-ounce cannister: This recent launch, which features miniature M&M's in a series of brightly colored plastic containers, seems like a new product, but it's actually just a new package for M&M's Baking Bits, which have been around since 1994. Despite this minor flimflammy, I've grown extremely fond of the Minis — the cannister lid makes an very pleasing sound when you pop it open with a satisfying flick of the thumb, and the package is great for snacking while driving, something that's much more difficult with the traditional M&M's soft pack. Addiction beckons. (M&M/Mars, High St., Hackettstown, NJ 07840)



Rain-Blo Re-Use-It Righteously Recycled Bubble Gum, 2-ounce container: Recycling, incredibly enough, is now considered sufficiently cool to serve as the marketing concept for a brand of bubble gum. Of course, the little pebble-like gum fragments aren't actually recycled — they just look that way. Ironically, they're packaged in a hard-plastic container that will no doubt outlive us all once it ends up in the landfill. (Leaf, Inc., 500 N. Field Dr., Lake Forest, IL 60045)

Power Pez Candy Dispenser: Some Pez fanatics of my acquaintance (including longtime *Beer Frame* booster Tom Lupoff, who first alerted me to this product's existence) are up in arms over this motorized toy, maintaining that any deviation from the standard cartoon-head Pez dispenser amounts to heresy. But I love gadgets, and this one's a doozy: It features a circular, multicolored tray with 12 Pez-shaped slots, each of which spins around counterclockwise while the whole tray slowly rotates clockwise, creating a mesmerizing effect as it spits out one Pez at a time. Two packs of Pez are included with the \$3.99 dispenser; incredibly, so is the necessary battery. (Cap Toys, Inc., address shown above.)

The Yardstick, 3.5-ounce stick: We're always told that quantity doesn't necessarily imply quality, but it's hard not to be seduced by the Yardstick, a stick of bubble gum whose length is suggested by its name. Great packaging, too: One side of the long, thin box features a time line devoted to gum history ("1869: Ohio Dentist William Semple patents the first chewing gum"); another lists gum trivia ("Heavyweight boxing champ Jack Dempsey chewed gum to make his jaw stronger"). Good luck fitting it into a kid's trick-or-treat bag, though. (The Foreign Candy Co., 451 Black Forest Rd., Hull, IA 51239)

HeaterMeals, Assorted 12-ounce entrées (HeaterMeals Inc.)



The collapse of the Cold War may be a boon for mankind and all that (yawn), but it's been a disaster for the classically inconspicuous bomb shelter industry. The full extent of this loss is demonstrated by the recent launch of HeaterMeals, a product so perfectly suited to the subterranean bunker that I'm already heading out to the back yard with a shovel.

A HeaterMeals box looks like your typical TV dinner, but distinctions soon become apparent when you open the package. The meal, which requires no refrigeration, is packed inside a sealed plastic container sitting face-down on a Styrofoam tray. Affixed to the base of the tray is a flat iron-magnesium tablet, which functions as an improbable but highly effective stove. Lift up the meal for a moment, pour a few ounces of water onto the tablet, replace the meal onto the tray, and slide the whole thing back into the HeaterMeals box. The water hitting the tablet produces an exothermic reaction, which generates a tremendous amount of heat — the water actually *boils off*. Fourteen minutes later, you can enjoy your

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hot grilled turkey breast or cheese ravioli in carefree comfort while thermonuclear conflagration rages overhead. You say your bomb shelter's running low on fluids? Not to worry — a two-once packet of tap water is included with each HeaterMeal, so you can start the chemical reaction without dipping into your own water supply. Plasticware, salt, pepper, and a napkin are provided as well.

HeaterMeals' iron-magnesium tablet has been used by the military since 1990 and entered the civilian realm in 1995. But with the bomb shelter angle obviously not shaping up as a growth market, who's buying this product? Truckers, mainly, although the folks at HeaterMeals Inc. envision a much wider consumer base. One of their promotional brochures features a lengthy breakdown of potential customers, including construction workers, campers and hikers, boaters, traveling salespeople, busy office workers taking lunch at their desks, road workers, college students, and hunters and fishermen ("*unsuccessful* hunters and fishermen," notes *Beer Frame* reader Al Coleman, who first brought HeaterMeals to my attention). To this list we might add survivalists, Montana Freeman, Branch Davidians, Unabomb suspects living in electricity-free cabins, and *Soldier of Fortune* subscribers, all of which suggests an opportunity for the HeaterMeals market-research team to convene some very entertaining focus groups.

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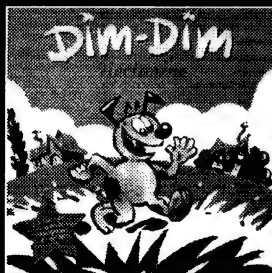
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Meanwhile, how do they taste? Surprisingly good, as it turns out. Of the six entrées available, the turkey, pepper steak, chili, and ravioli offerings are all reasonably palatable and much better than, say, hospital or airplane food — not the highest of culinary standards, granted, but still a major step forward when you consider that the menu at Chez Bunker has never been the stuff of which gourmands are made. This product represents such an improvement over the likes of powdered milk and freeze-dried meats, in fact, that maybe it's time to reassess our nuclear military agenda — with HeaterMeals on hand, the idea of being stuck underground for a year or two until the planet stops glowing doesn't seem like such a bad thing. So the hell with diplomacy — let's just bomb the crap out of those Russkies! Or the North Koreans, or the Libyans, or the Iraqis. Or whoever we're mad at this week. (Heater Meals Inc., 311 Northland Blvd., Cincinnati, OH 45246)

Update: Shortly after encountering HeaterMeals, I found the perfect bomb shelter drink: Fizzies tablets, which turn an ordinary glass of water into a bubbly, sparkling beverage. Of course, you could achieve the same effect with Alka-Seltzer, which is exactly what a Fizzies tablet looks like as it effervesces away at the bottom of your glass. But Alka-Seltzer tastes really gross, while Fizzies, which are available in a range of soda-inspired flavors like cherry, root beer, grape, and orange, taste — well, really gross, actually. I tried one of the root beer tablets in a glass of water and was impressed when the resulting drink gave off a suitably sarsaparilla-ish aroma, but the taste test was less inspiring. Things went from bad to worse when I followed the package's suggestion to try Fizzies in milk — the brown root beer tablet released a strange array orange and green detritus and left a head of grainy foam that looked like rancid shaving cream and was still floating atop the beverage several hours later.

Such problems notwithstanding, Fizzies still exude a strong nostalgic appeal. They were originally launched in 1957 (positioning them perfectly for the golden age of bomb shelters) but were taken off the market in 1968, when the FDA imposed a ban on cyclamates. Thanks to NutraSweet and a bunch of retro-minded baby boomer investors looking to recapture their youth, Fizzies were reintroduced last year. And as the product's press release notes, you don't even need a glass of liquid to get in on the fun — just stick a Fizzies tablet directly on your tongue, let it do its thing, and soon you'll "spew blue goo" and have "colored foam oozing out of your mouth." All of which should help you blend in quite nicely with your nuclear-irradiated neighbors once you finally emerge from your fallout haven. (Premiere Innovations, Inc., Box 515, Pacific Palisades, CA 90272)

Reese's Crunchy Cookie Cups, 1.44-ounce pack (Hershey Foods Corporation)

With research, development, test-marketing, advertising, and promotion being what they are, the startup costs for launching a new product have become so high that most companies are now rather cautious about it. Still, brand diversity is crucial in today's marketplace, so what's a company to do?



The typical compromise is for a firm to forego creating genuinely new products and instead concentrate on spinoffs from its existing product line. After all, there's no reason for Kellogg's to risk a huge investment in launching a new cereal when they can just add some chocolate to their Frosted Flakes and thereby come up with Cocoa Frosted Flakes — which is precisely what they recently did.

Another good example of this is Reese's Crunchy Cookie Cups, the latest variation on Reese's Peanut Butter Cups. While some recent Reese's product entries have been lackluster at best (the ho-hum NutRageous candy bar [see *Beer Frame #4*] and the noxious Reese's Peanut Butter Puffs cereal [see *BF#3*] come to mind), I'm happy to report that the Cookie Cups are fantastic. The chocolate cookie (which is neither an Oreo nor a Hydrox — it's just a generic chocolate wafer cookie) adds an interesting textural quality without interfering with the chocolate/peanut butter interaction. Plus if you bite into the cups to reveal a cross-section view of the candy, the layers of chocolate, peanut butter, and cookie look really cool.

Reese's has quietly been building its brand diversity in recent years. In addition to the aforementioned products, the firm's offerings also include Reese's Pieces, Reese's Peanut Butter, Reese's Peanut Butter Baking Chips, Reese's Bits for Baking, Reese's Shell Topping (an ice cream accessory), Reese's Sprinkles (also for ice cream), and seasonal candies like Reese's Peanut Butter Eggs and Reese's Peanut Butter Christmas Trees.

One item missing from that list is Reese's Crunchy, a peanut butter cup variety that has just been discontinued and replaced by the Crunchy Cookie Cups (some Reese's Crunchy are still available for sale, but they'll disappear once the residual back-stock is exhausted). Reese's has clearly learned a few things about packaging since Reese's Crunchy was launched in 1976: Whereas the Reese's Crunchy wrapper was a drab, unappetizing brown, the new Crunchy Cookie Cups have a beautiful wrapper design that features a dynamic orange-to-yellow gradation and an enticing illustration. The

new Cookie Cups wrapper even has the word “crunchy” rendered in a typeface that evokes a sense of crunchiness, something Reese’s never bothered to do with the old Reese’s Crunchy wrapper design. No wonder sales of that product fell flat.

Naturally, Reese’s spokesperson Lisa McNelis took a simpler view of things when I called her recently. The new Cookie Cups product, she said, “is the one that consumers told us they wanted.” This tendency to blame everything on focus groups turned out to be McNelis’s favorite way of answering (read: not answering) my questions — when I asked her, for example, why the Crunchy Cookie Cups are 10 percent smaller than the regular Reese’s cups and Reese’s Crunchy (both of which weigh 1.6 ounces per two-pack, compared to the Crunchy Cookie Cups’ 1.44 ounces), she said the smaller size resulted from “extensive consumer testing” regarding the “optimal cookie-to-peanut butter ratio.” Of course, this is no answer at all, since a ratio, by definition, can be maintained just as easily at 1.6 ounces (or at any other weight) as it can at 1.44 ounces.

Reese’s Crunchy Cookie Cups are so good, however, that for once I’m willing to stop quibbling about such minor issues. So let’s hear it for the combination of chocolate, peanut butter, and cookie — two great tastes may taste great together, but it turns out that three of them taste even better. (Hershey Foods Corp., Hershey, PA 17033)

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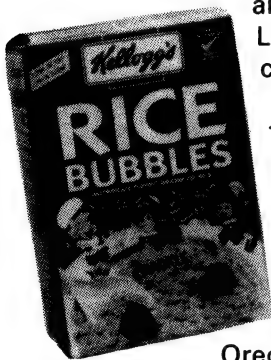
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Plunder from Down Under (assorted manufacturers)

When most people travel abroad, they sample the local culture by doing things that seem, y'know, cultural — visiting museums, going on walking tours, checking out ancient historical sites. Culture, however, is where you find it, and when I travel abroad I like to find it in a more pedestrian spot: the local supermarket.

Scoff if you must. But the supermarket, as I like to remind people, is just that — a *super market* — and as such is an ideal place for inventorying a country's consumption gumption. For better or worse (guess), you can tell a lot more about America by perusing the cereal aisle at Price Club than by visiting the Statue of Liberty; foreign supermarkets function similarly as cultural barometers for their respective nations.



As it happens, I vacationed last year in Australia and New Zealand, where the most obvious thing about the supermarket culture is how thoroughly it's been infected by *our* culture. A quick perusal of a small New Zealand grocery in Wellington revealed scores of familiar products and brand names, including Planter's, Colgate, Vaseline, Tampax, Spam, Uncle Ben's, Drano,

Oreos (but no Hydrox, alas), Crayola, Hershey's, and a lot more; most of these were also present in Australia, as were others like Sara Lee, Kraft, Chips Ahoy!, and Weight Watchers.

Upon closer inspection, however, an indigenous consumer landscape began to take shape. One thing I quickly learned, for example, was that just about every grocery establishment in New Zealand, from the biggest supermarket to the lowliest corner store, is well stocked with 5-ounce cans of Salisbury Whole Peeled Lamb Tongues. And while you can get a Milky Way bar in New Zealand, complete with the familiar Milky Way logo, the bar itself is more like what we'd call a 3 Muskateers. Other observations, grouped into a few subject areas of particular interest to me, are as follows:

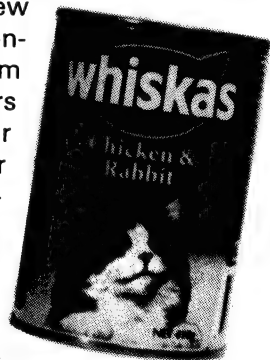
Breakfast: Both countries feature an abundance of Kellogg's products, most of them quite familiar. Rice Krispies, interestingly, are available under the name Rice Bubbles — identical to the American version in almost every detail, right down to the depictions of Messrs. Snap!, Crackle!, and Pop! on the box, except for the product name. Of course, there are plenty of non-Kellogg's options as well, including Cappuccino Flakes, a box of which I scored in Melbourne. "Now you can have the full flavour of Cappuccino," says the back panel, "without having to use your espresso machine." For those willing to at least boil some water, there's Nestlé Coffee & Milk, an instant coffee with the milk and sugar already mixed in. I found a

canned, powdered variety in New Zealand and a syrupy *squeeze tube* version of the same product in Australia.

Cat food: It's no surprise to learn that people in other parts of the world eat different foods than we do; it takes a bit longer, however, to consider how these gastronomic distinctions might shake out in the pet-food aisle. I hadn't given the matter much thought until I visited a Melbourne supermarket, where I found an assortment of Whiskas cat food — a common American brand — in flavors like "Salmon, Prawn, Marrowbone & Cheese," "Beef, Lamb & Rabbit," and "Pilchards & Whiting." Other brands featured similar offerings. Just for the record, my cats ate the Australian flavors without incident, which means either that they have very culturally flexible palates or, more likely, that all cat food tastes the same anyway.

Candy: There were lots of lessons to be learned in the candy aisles Down Under, but the most interesting one was this: A few years ago a friend gave me a playfully designed box of candy cigarettes from Australia. The product was called Fags, which is what the Aussies, with their British-derived culture, call cigarettes. During my Australian trip, I found the same product with the same package design — only now it was called Fads, not Fags, which just goes to show that political correctness is a trans-continental phenomenon.

Alcohol: Bartending in Australia and New Zealand, as several friends explained to me, is considered about half a step up the job ladder from McDonald's, and the art of the mixed drink suffers accordingly. In fact, if you're sitting around your house in Christchurch and feeling a bit parched for a cocktail, you don't even have to go to a bar — you can just go to the supermarket (the best one in Christchurch is the splendidly named Big Fresh) and buy yourself a premixed bottle or can of Jack Daniel's and Coke, Jim Beam and Coke, or whatever — convenient but appalling. Meanwhile, home brewing may have some sort of yuppie cachet here in America, but in New Zealand it's just another low-budget way to get drunk. Home-brew kits for most major NZ beers are readily available in the country's supermarkets, and my Auckland pal Lesley says they're "very popular" with the down-and-out set.



Finally, I had an odd experience at Daimaru, a Melbourne department store whose gourmet department featured an assortment of supposed "delicacies" from America. Among the culinary delights on display were a jar of Jif Peanut Butter (selling for an outrageous \$12.35, although it's worth remembering that the Australian dollar was worth about 80 percent of ours at the time), a squeeze

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bottle of French's Mustard (\$3.95), a small box of Minute Rice (\$5.10), assorted flavors of Jell-O (\$2.70 a box), a bottle of A.1. Steak Sauce (\$9.95), a box of Albers Hominy Grits (\$5.60), a box of Betty Crocker Brownie Mix (\$5.65), a small can of Crisco (\$6.70), and a can of Campbell's Manhattan Clam Chowder whose expiration date had passed five months earlier (\$4.95). Of course, if this represents a typical foreign notion of American "gourmet" standards, it can only make you wonder about all those high-priced European foods they sell at gourmet shops here in the States.

Giovanni's Pâtés, assorted 2.25-ounce cans (Giovanni's Appetizing Food Products, Inc.)

My pursuit of inconspicuous consumption has led to some interesting sobriquets. "You're a consumer obsessive," said one observer; "a minutiae fetishist," opined another. These descriptions are fine, but they're really just fancy-shmancy ways of expressing a much simpler truth: I'm a *collector*.

I've always collected things. First it was baseball cards, then comic books, then wheat pennies, then records, then industrial artifacts, then coin-operated gadgets, and so on. If you're not afflicted with collector's disease then you'll never understand, but if you're a fellow sufferer then you know what I'm talking about — it's not a choice, it's an *imperative*.

Surprisingly enough, simple grocery items rarely appeal to my collector instincts — like, who really needs to own every variety of Campbell's soup, right? Occasionally, though, I encounter a product line that pushes all my hunter-gatherer buttons. Such was the case when my friend Ray sent me a can of Giovanni's Deviled Crab Pâté.

I should mention here that pâté is not exactly a staple of my diet — I lean toward beer and pretzels, not wine and crackers, and my idea of "gourmet" is more White Castle than white tablecloth. Still, this pâté featured one of the most appealing packages I'd ever seen: a small disc of a can with a playful illustration on top and a lovely serving-suggestion photo on the bottom. Some bouncy type and graphics ran along the side edge, including the following: "One of the 'Good Little Cans' that go all over the world!" This charming-line hinted of further Giovanni's goodies, which was enough to activate my collecting impulses — within moments I was intuitively speculating on how many varieties of "Good Little Cans" there might be, how big a shelf would be needed to display them, and where such a shelf might be mounted in my apartment. Realizing that I was getting ahead of myself, I abandoned such fantasies long enough to call Giovanni's and ask for the complete set.





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A few phone calls and some tense anticipation later, I had all nine Giovanni's pâté varieties set out on my kitchen counter: crab, shrimp, lobster, trout, mushroom, salmon, goose, turkey, and chicken liver, the latter of which kicked off the line back in 1941. As I suspected, the cans are immensely satisfying to hold, play with, or just look at — at 2½ inches wide by an inch thick, they're just small enough to seem like toys, an impression reinforced by their stackability and colorful illustrations. As for the pâtés themselves, they taste fine, but that frankly seems beside the point when dealing with such a stimulating package. Fortunately, I procured two cans of each variety, so that I could have my pâté and eat it too.

Giovanni's secretary-treasurer, Elvira Ricossa, said the pâtés retail for between \$1.35 and \$2.50 and that the lobster, salmon, turkey, and goose varieties each move about half a million units a year. Ricossa, whose late husband Giovanni Ricossa founded the small company in 1935, seemed oblivious to the product line's collector appeal, although she noted that I wasn't the first to be captivated by a Giovanni's package — the firm's anchovy paste won *Tube Topics* magazine's 1994 Metal Tube of the Year award. She also said Giovanni's plans to revise and slightly enlarge the pâté cans for 1997, which means that the ones in my possession will become — of course — collector's items. (Giovanni's Appetizing Food Products, Inc., 37775 32 Mile Rd., Richmond, MI 48062)



The 99¢ Store: assorted products and manufacturers

While superstores like Wal-Mart reshape the American consumer landscape by laying waste to Main Streets across the country, one form of mom-and-pop retailing is managing to flourish: super-discount shops — or, more specifically, 99¢ stores.

The rise of these stores in the wake of the Wal-Mart revolution is no coincidence — the merchandise in these small shops is, primarily, the stuff that even the superstores couldn't sell. Supplied with a steady stream of overstock, damaged goods, and outright failures, their culture chronicled in trade magazines like *Discount Merchandiser* and *Discount Store News*, these shops are a testament to the American dream that anybody can sell anything to anyone as long as the price is right.

The great thing about a 99¢ store, of course, is that the merchandise tends to arrive in small, discontinued lots, which leads to rapid turnover. So you can go into the store every two weeks or so and find a completely different inventory each time. Not even super-markets offer such an invigorating consumer experience.



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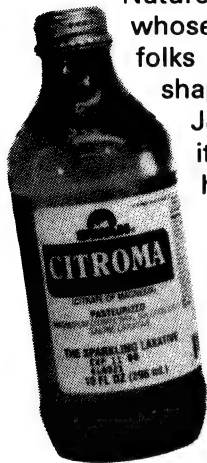
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I recently spent a morning shopping in my neighborhood's discount shops (which include a 99¢ store and a 97¢ store — whoa, talk about your cutthroat competition!), during which time I identified several basic product categories that serve as staples of this sort of retail enterprise:

Generic Products: Some products end up at 99¢ stores as a last resort, but some — especially generic brands — are manufactured specifically for the discount-retail market. A good example is Nature's Choice Baby Shampoo (Nature's Choice, Inc.), whose package design owes a rather obvious debt to the folks at Johnson & Johnson, right down to a teardrop-shaped icon on the label, which is clearly meant to evoke J&J's "No More Tears" slogan. As for the shampoo itself, everyone knows it's all the same anyway, so I was happy to grab a 16-ounce bottle for 99 cents.



Seasonal Overstock: Around the time of the Christmas holidays, lots of companies and organizations slap their logos onto just about anything — especially pens, coffee mugs, and t-shirts — and give them away as promotional freebies to clients and customers. And where does the overstock on this sort of product end up? Guess. Encountering a shelf of such goodies, I scored a Goodyear Tires coffee mug (manufacturer unlisted) from a sea of mugs that included choices like the Aetna Insurance Co., the New York City Burn Center, and the Paralympics.

Failed Products: "Failed," of course, is a relative concept — just because something failed at the conventional retail level doesn't mean it can't succeed at the 99-cent level. The great thing about these products is that you can usually figure out pretty quickly *why* they failed, as in the case of a 10-ounce bottle of Citroma (Cumberland-Sawn, Inc.), which bills itself as "The Sparkling Laxative." It's not clear just why anybody thought the world needed such a product, but the shelf full of Citroma overstock that I found at my 99¢ store shows that they were sadly mistaken.

Defective Products: Some products are manufactured incorrectly, others get damaged in shipment, and others get manhandled on the shelves by rambunctious consumers. But nothing, no matter how defective, is truly unsalable in the land of 99 cents. Not even a doll with its legs separated from its torso (manufacturer unlisted), as I discovered in one corner of the store. Sure, the chances of selling this sort of item may not seem very robust at first glance (I suppose it'd make a great toy if your kid is an amputee, but that's a pretty limited market) but what the hell — after all, I bought one.

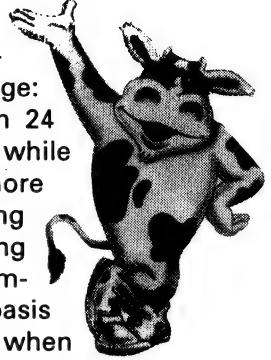
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Smilk (Smilk, Inc.); Smooth Moos Smoothies (Pepsi-Cola Co.); Moo Koolers (Dairy Farm Products)

Let's say you work in marketing. Let's further say that it's your job to develop a snappy campaign for a new beverage aimed at kids. And let's finally say that the primary ingredient in this beverage — and hence the centerpiece of your marketing efforts — is *milk*.

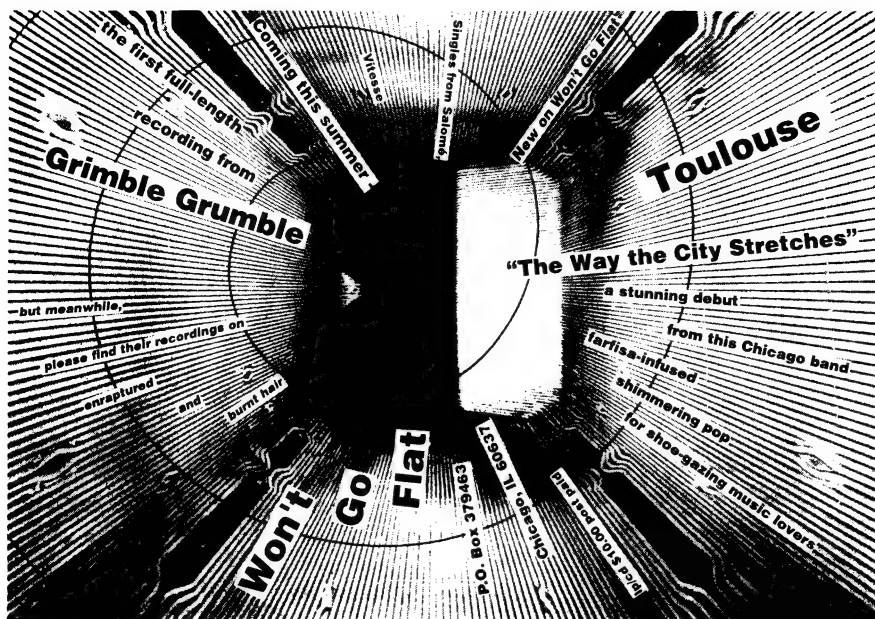
Well, you can see the problem. Milk doesn't readily lend itself to exciting promotional schemes, which may explain why it hasn't fared particularly well in our mass-media age: Annual per-capita milk consumption fell from 24 gallons to 16 gallons between 1964 and 1995, while annual per-capita soft drink consumption more than doubled during the same period, jumping from 19 gallons to 52 gallons. Don't get the wrong idea — milk is still a \$19 billion industry, and commands a certain amount of respect on this basis alone, but it's flat, stagnant, *boring*. Let's face it, when your big ad campaign centers around a bunch of slobs who can't even be bothered to wipe their upper lips clean, you've got some major problems.



So, given the limited options, perhaps it isn't so surprising that three recent milk-based product launches have all taken similar marketing tacks. Like, *very* similar. The products in question are Smilk, Smooth Moos Smoothies, and Moo Koolers. All are new low- or nonfat flavored milk drinks, all are aimed at kids, and all just happen to employ the same sort of cartoon spokescharacter on their packaging: a hipster cow.


It's tough to determine just who's ripping off whom here, since each product was in development for years before being launched, but it seems fairly safe to say that there's no surfeit of imagination running rampant in the dairy business. Consider: Smilk's cow, named Smilkster ("The Cow of a Different Color," according to the product's press kit), is shown wearing sunglasses and Nike-style sneakers while standing with his left arm akimbo and his legs crossed (see above right). This, of course, makes Smilkster easy to distinguish from the Smooth Moos cow, named Spot (variously described in the product's promotional literature as a "lovable bovine prankster" and as a "charismatic cow"), who wears Converse-style sneakers while standing with his left arm akimbo and his legs crossed (see left). The relative renegade of the group is the Moo Koolers cow, who has no name and no sneakers but does wear sun-






Pop Rocks.

THE VERGE/PHENOMENON



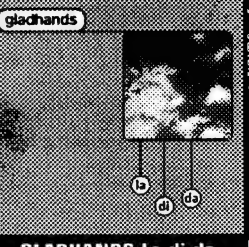
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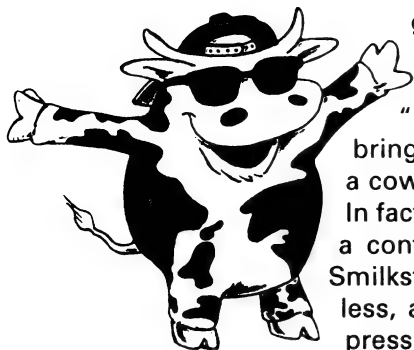
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glasses and a backwards baseball cap (see left). Ol' Bessie, meet MTV.

You may have noticed that I used "his" in the last paragraph — which brings us to the gender factor. You'd expect a cow hawking a milk product to be female. In fact, the very notion of a male dairy cow is a contradiction in terms. Broad-shouldered Smilkster, however, is clearly male nonetheless, and is even referred to as "he" in the press materials. Smilk publicist Leslie Freed first attributed this to "poetic license," but then explained that Smilkster was originally depicted as a more conventional cow: female, on all fours, complete with an udder. Unfortunately, explained Freed, market research showed that this version of the character was popular only with very young children, and was a particular turn-off for boys. The company's subsequent research found that boys were generally unreceptive to female spokescharacters, and so Smilkster evolved into the male version we see today.

The situation regarding Spot, the Smooth Moos cow, is more complex. The character's name and visage tilt toward the masculine but are arguably gender-neutral, and the press kit nimbly avoids any "he" or "she" designations. Smooth Moos publicist Larry Jabonsky initially told me, "A milk-giving cow clearly connotes a female character," but then acknowledged that he hadn't given the matter much thought and said he'd double-check. Sure enough, he called back a few days later, this time accompanied by marketing director April Thornton, who said, "We think of Spot as being male — sort of our bovine version of Ferris Bueller." With such a confused gender identity, Spot's going to need something stronger to drink than milk.

This leaves the nameless Moo Coolers mascot, who looks vaguely feminine and is referred to as "she" in the press kit, as the only demonstrably distaff member of the troika. When asked to explain the thinking behind the gender development of the character, Scott Higgins of the American Dairy Association replied, "I'm going to keep it short and sweet: because milk comes from a cow." Perhaps Higgins could explain this to Freed and Thornton.

All three products are being regionally test-marketed and are not yet available for national distribution, although Smilk recently struck a deal to be carried nationwide by Wal-Mart. As for the flavor, they're all quite palatable, with Smooth Moos perhaps a bit richer and tastier than the others. There are other distinctions between the products as well, including packaging format (glass bottles for Smooth Moos, plastic bottles for Moo Coolers, the milk industry's

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traditional cardboard cartons for Smilk) and storage requirements (Smooth Moos is shelf-stable and therefore requires no refrigeration; the other two must be kept cold). Ultimately, however, I keep coming back to the way the character-driven sales pitches mimic each other. In this case it's the dairy marketers, not the cows, who are exhibiting a herd mentality. (Smilk, Inc., Box 483, Greenwich, CT 06836; Pepsi-Cola Co., 1 Pepsi Way, Somers, NY 10589; Dairy Farm Products, New Bremen, OH 45869)

ToothTowels (SB Products, Inc.); Toothbrush Spray II (Levinson Brokerage); Sanitung Tongue Cleaner (mfr. unlisted)

Remember back in elementary school, when we were all taught that the human mouth is a hotbed of germs and bacteria? Most of us dutifully filed this knowledge away and adjusted our behavior accordingly: We got serious about brushing and flossing regularly, we always declined a bite of the scuzzy kid's sandwich even if it was our favorite kind, and we vowed never to kiss anyone as long as we lived (that last part got revised in junior high). In every class, though, there were a few kids who never fully recovered from the mental image of a few jillion microscopic pathogens running loose in their mouths, and it is for these oral-hygiene paranoiacs that a host of specialized products are now available.

For people who want to be able to freshen their mouths at a moment's notice, there's ToothTowels, little towelettes that look like Handi Wipes, smell like a dentist's office, and taste like weak mouthwash. The directions are simple enough: "Rub your teeth vigorously with the cloth." But the real problem here is redundancy — if you can remember to bring some ToothTowels along in your purse or glove compartment or briefcase or backpack, couldn't you just as easily remember to bring along a toothbrush?

Then again, maybe toothbrushes aren't so great either — after all, where do you think all those nasty mouth germs end up after you've brushed your teeth? Yep, right on your toothbrush, where they can reinfect you during a subsequent brushing or even jump over to the toothbrush sitting next to yours in the bathroom rack. If you've been losing sleep over this, just zap the little buggers with a spritz of Toothbrush Spray II, a vaguely medicinal-smelling mixture of deionized water, glycerine, and standardized extract of grapefruit that's sold almost exclusively in health-food stores. Snake-oil fans will find plenty to interest them in TSII — the manufacturer, Levenson Brokerage, *implies* that the product is anti-bacterial but can't make any specific claims about this due to some pesky FDA regulations. Levenson also uses a post-office box for a mailing address and lists no phone or fax number on its stationery. The firm's promo lit,

which appears to have been produced on a conventional typewriter, is riddled with grammatical errors, typos, amateurish writing, and slippery research citations. Draw your own conclusions.

Fortunately, even the most cynical observer should be won over by the Sanitung Tongue Cleaner, an extremely appealing product available for a few bucks at Bigelow Pharmacy in Greenwich Village. The decidedly low-tech Sanitung is a fantastic example of form following function — it's a 4½-inch-long plastic wand with a gently curved scraping surface at one end. To use it, just stick out your tongue, stick in the Sanitung, and scrape away those evil bacteria — it's sort of like shaving your tongue. The combination of weird tactile stimulation and utter absurdity is bound to leave you giggling, something the oral hygiene world could definitely use a bit more of. Like so many great inventions, the Sanitung is a product of dubious practical value (my dentist, in fact, pooh-pooed all three of these items) but it's a great conversation piece at parties. Just remember not to let anyone else use yours. (SB Products Inc., 1872 S. Tamiami Trail, Suite D, Venice, FL 34293; Levenson Brokerage, Box 19606, LA, CA 90019; Bigelow Pharmacy, 414 6th Ave., NYC 10011)

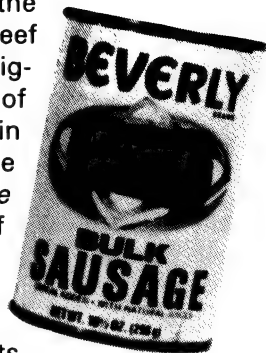
Update: When the preceding review ran in my *New York* magazine column, it resulted in an avalanche of like-minded product submissions from manufacturers and readers alike. Amidst the assorted electric toothbrushes, oral sponges, and oddball floss dispensers that piled up in my mailbox, I was particularly intrigued by the Oralgiene Tongue Cleaner (Oralgiene USA, Inc.), which is apparently fighting for the same market share as Sanitung. Who knew the tongue-cleaning arena was so competitive? The Oralgiene product, which according to its promo literature "has been specifically designed to adapt to the contours of the tongue without causing a gag reflex," is clearly the more refined-looking — and hence boring — of the two items. If you insist on scraping away those nasty germs, I say stick with Sanitung.

But I shouldn't scoff — tongue hygiene is apparently serious business to many people. One reader took me to task for deriding Sanitung and noted that tongue-cleaning had been the subject of a recent report on ABC-TV's *20/20*. "It seems that if the product is of 'dubious practical value,' as you stated," read the letter, "*20/20* would not have endorsed its use." This missive, which bore a Queens postmark, had no return address and was signed "Name Withheld," which indicates either that tongue-cleaning is an even touchier subject than I already thought or, more likely, that nobody wants to admit believing what they hear on *20/20*. (Oralgiene USA, Inc., 421 N. Rodeo Dr., Suite 15114, Beverly Hills, CA 90210)

ODDS AND ENDS

Time for another roundup of products that didn't quite intrigue me enough to inspire full-blown reviews but still merit a closer look ...

Beverly Bulk Sausage with Natural Juices, 10.5-ounce can: I've encountered a lot of mystery meats over the years, but Beverly Bulk Sausage, which I recently found in a North Carolina supermarket, really scales new heights in disgustingness — the first four entries on the ingredients listing are beef tripe, pork stomachs, beef heart meat, and the obligatory partially defatted beef fatty tissue (a staple of processed-meat canned goods). Interestingly, in the tradition of such inconspicuously consumptive classics as Meeter's Kraut Juice [see *Beer Frame* #3] and Guycan Corned Mutton [BF#2], each of which pairs a loathsome foodstuff with a magnificent package, the Beverly label design is a remarkably beautiful combination of type and image — a lovely product, as long as it stays in its can. (Foell Packing Co. [the same people behind the pork brains discussed on p. 8], 3417 West 47th St., Chicago, IL 60632)



Hormel Pork Tidbits, 9-ounce jar: It's hard to imagine a more unlikely use for the word "tidbits" than the one employed by Hormel for this jar of vinegar-soaked chunks of pork hocks. *Tidbits* — it sounds so dainty, so quaint, one can almost imagine a tuxedo-clad waitstaff carrying hors d'oeuvre platters through a cocktail party and inquiring, "Pork tidbit, sir? Ma'am — pork tidbit?" When I called the Hormel consumer-response line and asked about the product's range of culinary possibilities, the helpful phone rep said they're simply meant to be consumed as is — or, as she put it, "All you do is eat 'em!" Of course, it might be best if the "you" in that sentence were taken in the most generic sense of the term. (Hormel Foods Corporation, 1 Hormel Place, Austin, MN 55912)

"Got Milk?" Barbie Doll: This fascinating exercise in cross-promotional licensing, which finds America's sweetheart dressed in a cow-patterned jumper while accessorized with a miniature carton of milk, and a miniature tray of chocolate-chip cookies, is the result of an unusual deal between Mattel, the dairy industry, and Nestlé — conclusive proof, as if any were needed, that even the most disparate groups can work together when pursuing a common goal (like, say, exploiting 8-year-old girls). But the limits of this sort of corporate comraderie can be found on the doll's upper lip, where the milk biz's telltale white mustache is, surprisingly, absent, a testament to Mattel's notorious persnickiness about tampering with Barbie's image. (Mattel Toys, 333 Continental Blvd., El Segundo, CA 90245)

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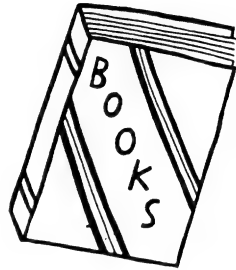
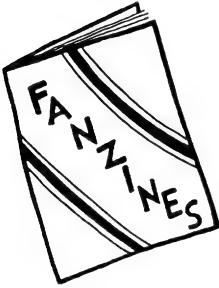


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M U S I C

VARIOUS ARTISTS - *Country & Western Music Jamboree* triple-LP (RCA Custom / Reader's Digest, '63)

Like the Lovin' Spoonful LP reviewed way back in *Beer Frame* #1, this second-hand treasure, which I found in a junk shop on Maryland's Eastern Shore and appears to have originally been sold as some sort of *Reader's Digest* promotion, is worth the \$3 I paid for it on physical virtues alone. The cover is made from a thick pasteboard with very nice lamination, and the front-cover illustration features a nice integration of type and image. Open up the front-flap gatefold and you find a generous pocket containing the three LPs — each in their own individually printed sleeves! It's not quite a box set, but the hefty 5/8-inch-thick spine makes it look like one when it's filed away on the shelf. Extensive (if somewhat ridiculous) liner notes begin on the inside front flap and continue on the back cover. All in all, quite the physically appealing document, and very nicely preserved to boot.... Obligatory music-related comment: This set features all sorts of classics like "Your Cheatin' Heart," "The Yellow Rose of Texas," and "Tennessee Waltz," among many others, but none of the recordings here are by the original artists — they were rerecorded by a bunch of shmoes specifically for this album — so it's a bit of a bust.

BEDHEAD, the Knitting Factory, 4/3/97

When I'm seeing a club show, I usually worm my way to the front so I can get a good view. Yes, I know the sound is often better toward the back of the room (or so I'm told), but if sound was the only thing that mattered then I'd just stay home and play records. When I'm at a show, I want to see what the band's doing, what they're wearing, etc. But I arrived a bit late to this Bedhead show and couldn't get anywhere near the stage, so my view was mostly blocked, plus one of the band members wasn't feeling well and performed sitting down. In short, I spent most of the set straining up on my tiptoes and still didn't see much of anything. Extremely unsatisfying...Obligatory music-related comment: On a purely sonic level, this was the best live set I've ever heard this band deliver, with tremendous textural variety evident throughout the show.

Only Cowards Walk Like Cowards



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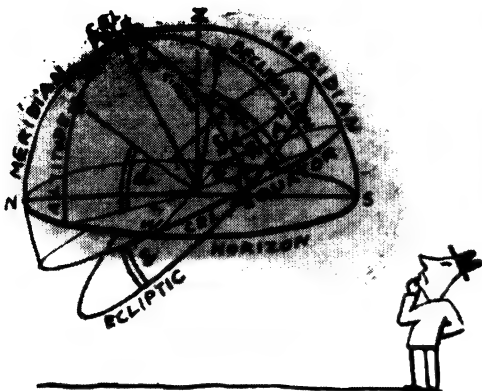
Enchanté, 245 E 19th St #12T NYC 10003

FUCK - *Baby Loves a Funny Bunny* CD (Walt / Rhesus / Lamp-lighter, '96); MATCHBOX 20 - *Long Day* promo double-CD (Lava/Atlantic, '96)

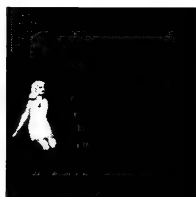
These two albums feature similar packaging gimmicks: the Matchbox 20 package resembles a box of wooden matchsticks, while the Fuck package mimics a conventional cardboard matchbook. Both are handsome designs, and both do a good job of executing their pyromaniacal concepts within the confines of standard CD dimensions (i.e., both of these will fit on the shelf with no problem — they even have perfectly functional spine type!), but which is better? The Fuck assemblage is the more ingenious of the two, as it features some admirably clever folding tricks, authentic matchbook-style graphics, and the obligatory “Close Cover Before Striking” disclaimer. But the Matchbox 20 design ultimately gets the nod by virtue of its use of a *genuine striking surface* along the top and bottom of the package....Obligatory music-related comment: The Fuck CD is their best record yet, although they still haven't released an album that even hints at their greatness as a live band; the guy who was kind enough to send me the Matchbox 20 album said that the packaging was the only interesting thing about it, so I never bothered to listen to it.

MOVIOLA - *Glen Echo Autoharp* CD (Spirit of Orr)

So I'm at Other Music one day and I see there's a new Moviola album, so I grab a copy. Then I notice that the back cover and spine are letterpressed or rubber-stamped or whatever, and that the band name and album title are nothing but an illegible smudge on the spine of the copy I've chosen. So I look at the other copies sitting in the racks and, like, *all* the spines are illegible smudges. All except one, that is — so I grab that one. Then I finish up the rest of my shopping and go the cash register, where Josh does that deal where he pulls aside the Moviola album I've chosen and replaces it with another copy from a pile that they've got behind the register, the idea being that he can then take the copy I'd selected, which already has a price sticker and security gizmo on it, and put it back in racks (he does the same with the other new releases I'm buying — I'm sure you all know the routine). I didn't really think about any of this until I got home and found that the copy he'd given me has, of course, an illegible smudge where the spine type should be. All my careful shopping, ruined by a retail ritual. I eventually hand-lettered the band name and album title onto the spine myself....Obligatory music-related comment: Yet another near-perfect record from a group that I now think of as the prototypical indie band — don't miss. (Spirit of Orr, 166 Lincoln St., 2nd Fl., Boston, MA 02111)



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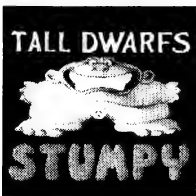
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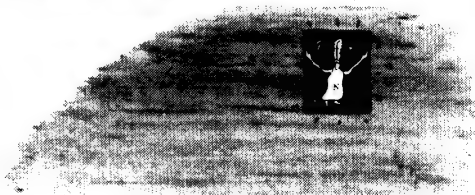
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VEHICLE FLIPS - "Ompompanoosuc" single (WPTS/Numeric)

Vehicle Flips frontguy Frank Boscoe has long shown a distinctive flair for innovative packaging, dating back to his days in Wimp Factor 14 [see *Beer Frame* #1]. He's really outdone himself, though, with this single: Boscoe collects old black-and-white photos — the kind you see at flea markets and thrift shops and such — and for this project he decided to slap a different vintage photo onto the front jacket panel of each copy of the record. This is not only impressive (800 copies of the single were pressed, so that's a lot of photos), but also gorgeous — my copy, for example, features a fantastic photo from the '30s or '40s depicting a bunch of guys posing on a rickety-looking diving board that extends over an old swimming hole. It looks fantastic on the front of the record, and the same can be said for the photos on most of the other copies that I've seen. Great job. ...Obligatory music-related comment: Boscoe's also one of the finest anecdotal songwriters currently working, with an effortless meoldic sensibility and an eye for detail that marks him as a master of the inconspicuous — this single showcases all his strengths. (WPTS/Numeric, c/o Paul Williams, 411 William Pitt Union, Pittsburgh, PA 15260)

THE MOUNTAIN GOATS, NYU's Loeb Student Center, 4/3/97

Two weird things about this show: First, it began at 7 pm, which is a very strange time for a rock show — it had barely gotten dark outside. As a result, the whole thing felt more like a rehearsal or a soundcheck than a real set. Second, it took place at NYU, so the audience was comprised primarily of students. Now, I'm hardly a fossil, but I'm a full decade removed from my college days, so by now I'm used to seeing plenty of younger faces at rock clubs. It's no big deal — we all become Daddy-O eventually, as I like to say. It was bizarre, however, to find myself surrounded *exclusively* by infants at this show — or at least that's what it felt like. I wasn't just the only person there who was older than 30; I was practically the only person older than 22. Very strange. At one point, some nü wave-ish 20-year-old approached me, held out a piece of paper, and said, "Wanna have a flier for a cool band that's playing tonight?" I already had plans for later that night, so I politely declined. "Oh," she sneered, "too cool, huh?" I was so dumbfounded by this rejoinder that she'd already walked halfway across the room before I could ask if her parents knew she was staying up past her bedtime. Goddamn kids today, no respect, yadda-yadda-yadda....Obligatory music-related comment: Solid Goats set, with some very promising new tunes that sound like they'd make the transition from acoustic guitar to electric quite nicely if John ever felt so inclined.



PHOTO: US NAVY ATTU 1942

THE MAKE-UP

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105. **MAKE-UP** RECORDED LIVE AT THE
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104. **TRUSTY** 'The Fourth Wise Man' (C)
103. **FIRE PARTY** complete discography (D)
102. **THE WARMERS** self-titled (C)
101. **BLUETIP** 'Dischord No. 101' (C)
100. **THE TEEN IDLES** 6 unreleased tracks from
1980 by Dischord's founders (A)
99. **THE MAKE-UP** 'Destination: Love
LIVE "At Cold Rice"' (C)
98. **THE CROWNHATE RUIN** 'Until the
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97. **LUNGFISH** 'Sound In Time' (C)
96. **SMART WENT CRAZY** 'Now We're Even' (C)
95. **BRANCH MANAGER** self-titled (C)
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71. **NATION OF ULYSSES** 'Plays Pretty for Baby' †‡ (C)
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CHAVEZ - *Ride the Fader* CD (Matador, '96)

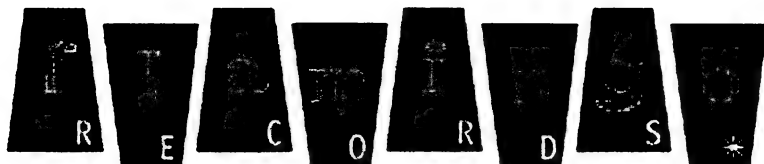
An astonishingly annoying package. At first glance it's almost neat the way the gatefold jacket mimics an old-style gatefold LP jacket, but the problems soon become apparent — the package doesn't fit standard CD-package specs in either the vertical or horizontal dimensions, making it a hassle to shelve. Even worse, it's hard to fathom why they just shoved the CD itself into the jacket pocket without an inner sleeve to protect it — my copy got scratched almost immediately, and several acquaintances reported the same problem....Obligatory music-related comment: The first three tracks are as powerful as anything they've done; most of the rest finds them coasting just a bit. (Matador, 676 Broadway, NYC 10012)

THE SCENE IS NOW, Brownies, 1/25/97

Sometimes it's a treat to see a band's soundcheck, sometimes not. In this case, the Scene were playing their first show in over five years, and nobody was more excited to see them than I was, so walking into the club and finding them still soundchecking was a nice surprise — after all those years, any opportunity to see them in any context was welcome. But when the club filled up and the band came out to play for real, I felt a teeny bit of letdown — I already knew which songs they'd be playing, I'd already seen some of the tricks they'd done with a few of the arrangements, and so on. The huge mental drumroll that had building up in my mind in the weeks prior to the show felt slightly unresolved, as if I'd somehow cheapened the experience by getting an early glimpse at the man behind the curtain. Lesson learned — the more excited I am about the show, the more important it is for me *not* to catch the soundcheck....Obligatory music-related comment: This fantastic set, particularly strong toward the last three or four songs, was worth the five-year wait.

GRIFTERS - "Stream/Coat of Silence" single (Derivative, '95)

I love the Grifters, but this single has been sitting in a big pile of unplayed 7" records in my living room for almost two years now and I still haven't played it. I keep thinking that I'll get around to listening to these records, but I never do. Why? Sometime in 1995 I lost patience with 7" singles — with rare exceptions, like the Vehicle Flips 7" reviewed on page 45, I just don't play them anymore, even when they're by my favorite bands. It took me almost a year to realize this, during which time I kept buying singles, most of which went straight into the pile, unplayed. This is a shame, I know, but lately I just feel like I can't be bothered. Maybe I'll snap out of it one day, in which case the pile will function nicely as a mid-'90s time capsule.... Obligatory music-related comment: Haven't played it, couldn't tell ya.



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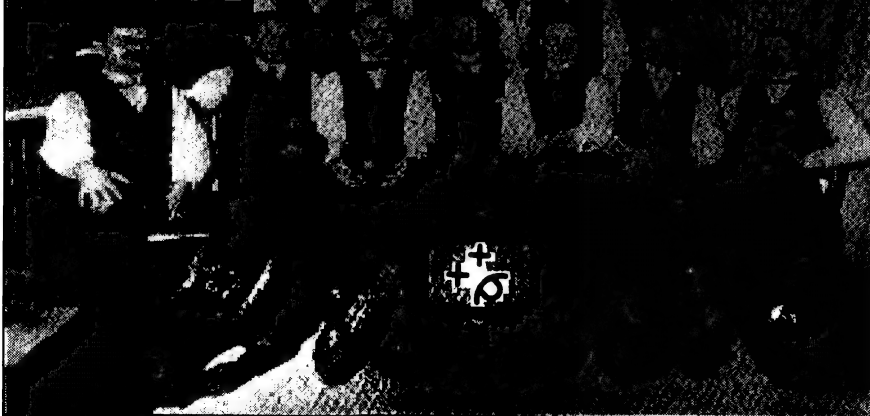
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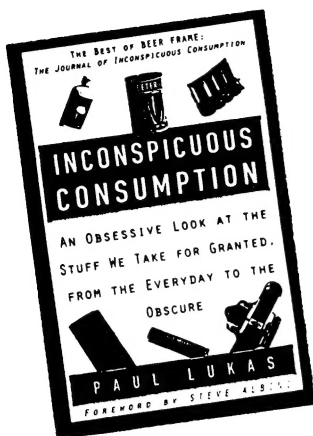
- JR Taylor, NY Press



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CONSUMPTION

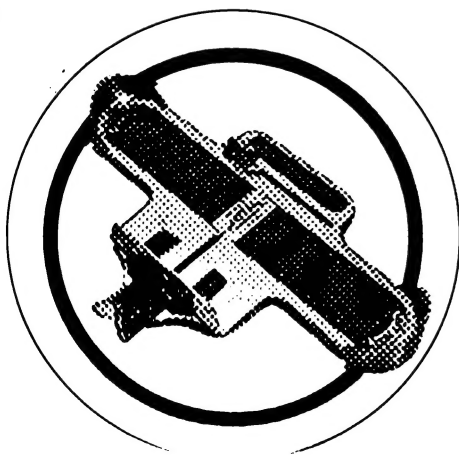
NEW! Beer Frame Record: The debut release on Inconspicuous Records is a five-song EP entitled *Object Lessons*, and features the Mountain Goats, The Scene Is Now, Men & Volts, Nothing Painted Blue, and Vehicle Flips each doing a fantastic song devoted to a specific product. Production details are still being worked out on this one, but it's certain to be worth the wait. **Available in Fall 1997; get in touch for info.**

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Beer Frame Hit Parade

- Junket - *S.F. Claremont Hi* CD (Road Cone, '96)
- Alec Bathgate - *Gold Lamé* CD (Flying Nun, '96)
- Jack Mudurian - *Downloading the Repertoire* CD (Arf! Arf!, '96)
- Fuck - *Baby Loves a Funny Bunny* CD (Walt/Rhesus/Lamplighter, '96) and live
- Wilco - *Being There* double-CD (Reprise, '96) and live
- Bis - *This Is Teen-C Power!* CD EP (Grand Royal)
- Wake Ooloo - *Stop the Ride* CD (Pravda, '96)
- Urinals - *Negative Capability ... Check It Out!* CD (Amphetamine Reptile)
- Danielson Family - *Tell Another Joke at the Ol' Choppin' Block* CD (Tooth & Nail) and live
- Moviola - *Glen Echo Autoharp* CD (Spirit of Orr)
- Robbie Fulks - *Country Love Songs* CD (Bloodshot, '96)
- Bettie Serveert - *Dust Bunnies* CD (Matador)
- Shackwacky - *Standing Above the Stars: The Lost Sessions* cassette (unlabeled, '95)
- The Mountain Goats - *Nothing for Juice* CD (Ajax, '96) and live
- Kleenex Girl Wonder - *Sexual Harrassment* CD (Full Court Press)
- Vehicle Flips - "Ompompanoošuc" single (WPTS/Numeric) and live
- Joe Wilman - *Joe Wilman Shows You How to Bowl Your Best* LP (Epic, '60s)
- The "Incomparable" Hildegard - "My Milwaukee/Wisconsinland" single (Raynard, '60s)
- Live sets by Neutral Milk Hotel, Dump, Alastair Galbraith, Guy Clark, the Chills, Cyrus Chestnut, Andre Williams, the Demolition Doll Rods, Richard Davies, and, of course, The Scene Is Now
- *Shark Fear, Shark Awareness* #3; *Crap Hound* #5; *Macros* #4; *Flatter!* #8; *Mystery Date* #5; *Poodle*, all issues; *Chickfactor* #10; *The Barlow Onanist* #7; *Eat This* #4; *Anti-Zine*, Feb. '97 issue; *Dishwasher* #14; *Wind-Up Toy* #5; *Other People's Mail* #4; *Stay Free!*, best-of issue
- *1958-59 American Bowling Congress League and Tournament Rules and Regulations* handbook
- Saturday-afternoon game of bingo at JD Bingo Parlor, Hildebran, N. Carolina
- Positively surreal evening spent at the Choptank Motel and Cocktail Lounge, Easton, Maryland
- Rabbit's Motel (which is a bar, not a motel), Asheville, North Carolina
- The very underrated state of Wisconsin and its many attractions, experienced first-hand last October
- Ping-Pong: Almost as good as bowling
- Package design for Collinsware Lime Mist Spray ("Perfect for any drink in place of a slice of lime"), half-ounce canister (Collins Brothers, Inc.)
- Package design for Nu-Gel Gelatin Capsules, 50-capsule pack (American Gelatin Products Co.)
- Package design for Everclear Grain Alcohol, 153 proof, 200-ml bottle (World Wide Distilled Products Company)
- Package design for Dear Lady! Bartlett Pears in Heavy Syrup, 16-oz. can (Snokist Growers)
- Package design for military-surplus can of U.S. Gov't Emergency Drinking Water (MacDonald-Bernier Co., Inc., ca. 1950s)
- Magnificent vintage egg scale, one of the most beautiful things I've ever seen (Jiffy-Way Incorporated, ca. 1940s)
- Coke machine, model #CSS-64G, now sitting in my kitchen (The Seeburg Corporation, ca. 1967)
- Lovely pig-shaped pewter candle-holder, stolen from a Manhattan restaurant
- "Shocking Pussy Photos!" 1.5" x 2" each, procured in restroom vending machine at National Liquor Bar, Milwaukee (manufacturer uncertain)
- Morton Supreme Quality Mushy Peas, 10.5-oz. can (British Wholesale Imports Inc.), John Cope's Fancy Evaporated White Sweet Corn, 15-oz. can (John Cope's Food Products, Inc.), and Belle of Maine Fiddleheads, 15-oz. can (W.S. Wells & Son), all of which justify my utter disdain for vegetables, reviews to appear next issue
- Uncle Milton's Fascinating Giant Ant Farm, 40th-anniversary edition (Uncle Milton Industries)
- JFK 50-cent pieces (U.S. Treasury Dept.), our most inconspicuous coinage
- Triangular "Pacific '97" 32-cent stamps (U.S. Postal Service)